

History of Sunken Park and Veteran's Memorial Park

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After Marsh Park and the Commons area, the next area to be developed into a city park was the area just east of old City Hall. This whole block was occupied by Von Tobel's lumberyard buildings on the 1885 Sanborn maps. Citizens thought the lumberyard was unsightly and wanted to have a centrally located park. In 1900, a group of citizens approached Von Tobel and offered him \$400 to move his lumberyard to the southwest corner of Seventh and Locust Streets. While negotiations were taking place with Von Tobel, the Wilson Lumber company bought the inventory and buildings. The area was then completely cleared.

There was just one problem with the new park site, it was depressed or sunken two to three feet. The citizens tried filling it with sand from the Munz sand pit south of town. This plan did not work well. Then the TP&W railroad offered to bring in fill dirt on flatbed cars if volunteers would unload it. Many volunteers helped move the fill material from the train cars to fill up the park. In 1902, the Fairbury GAR (Grand Army of the Republic) Post 75 donated two Civil War cannons for the park. Women's group held many fundraisers to pay for the other items needed for the park. The new park was donated to the city and was named Central Park.

In 1921, about twenty years after the citizens got Central Park built, the TP&W railroad proposed building a new roundhouse on the same site. Although it was desirable to have the new roundhouse in Fairbury, citizens did not want to exchange their beautiful new park for a "smoke vomiting roundhouse." The railroad plans for the new roundhouse in Central Park were rejected.

In the early 1970s, the fountain would often become a huge bubble generator. The laundry mats would sell little miniature boxes of laundry soap in a vending machine. Teenagers would dump the whole box of soap into the fountain.

In 1997, Bluestem Bank donated the funds to purchase a gazebo. This gazebo was installed on top of the old fountain. The two old Civil War cannons were temporarily removed at the time. Arrowhead Lodge used donated labor and material to re-install the cannons in the park in 2005.

In 2008, John Tollensdorf, Sr., donated the old Isaac Walton school bell to the city of Fairbury. It was installed in the park with an iron fence around it.

The east end of the park was then updated to honor our military veterans. In 2012, the Fairbury City Council voted to change the name from Central Park to Veteran's Memorial Park. In 2016, the Fairbury Improvement Group added five historical murals to the park. These murals cover the railroad, coal mining, Frances Townsend, the Fairbury Fair and

racetrack, and John Virgin. The Fairbury Garden Club continues to maintain all the flowers and plants in this park.

SUNKEN PARK

Sunken Park is one of Fairbury's history mysteries. Nobody is exactly sure why this area is sunken thirty-six inches into the ground. Fern Wharton was a reporter for the Blade in the 1980s. In her 1985 column, she asked the readers if anyone knew why this area was sunken, and none of the readers could answer this question.

The most logical explanation is that in 1857, the Peoria & Oquawka Railroad excavated this area for dirt to help build the railroad bed. In her Nicks from the Blade writings, Alma Lewis James noted that grocery stores on Locust Street used to dispose of their spoiled food in this depressed area. She also said that citizens used it as the city dump until Hi Taylor became Street Commissioner and stopped this practice. Alma said that after the citizens built Central Park, they decided it would be stylish and different to have a "Sunken Garden."

The early Sanborn Insurance maps drawn between 1885 and 1911 show grain storage buildings located down in the depressed area. There are several photographs from this era that also show frame buildings in the depressed area.

The earliest reference to Sunken Park occurred in the Blade in July of 1915. Some boys in Sunken Park ignited some sky-rockets. Unfortunately, one of the sky-rockets entered the open window of the German Apostolic Church in the middle of Sunday services. The church congregation was shocked, but nobody was injured.

The first mention of Sunken Park in the Pantagraph occurred in June of 1919. The Pantagraph noted there would be a July 4th celebration with a band concert and a luncheon in honor of Fairbury World War I soldiers in Sunken Park.

There is a circa 1914 panoramic photo of Sunken Park filled with early motorcyclists and their riders. Through the years, Sunken park was used for band concerts, pep rallies, dances, ice skating, and pet parades.

In June of 1985, a controversy developed about Sunken Park. Fosdick Poultry announced plans to fill in Sunken Park and build a new processing plant on that site. Fortunately for the park, the Fairbury City Council in a 5-2 vote vetoed the plan to convert the park to a food processing plant.

Children continue to play football and baseball in the summer months at Sunken Park. The last two years, the park has been used to host the popular food festival, A Local Taste: Flavors from the Farm.